

Summit offers services for ex-offenders

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One of the biggest challenges facing ex-offenders applying for jobs is answering that one question: Convicted felon?

For four years, Q-C Advocates have hosted the Summit of Hope, and Wednesday's expo was the largest in terms of the number of participating vendors.

"People make mistakes," said Marcus King, senior community outreach director for the Illinois Department of Corrections. "They deserve a second chance. They deserve an opportunity to get back on track."

About 65 vendors, which organizers say is double last year's number, crowded into First Church of the Nazarene, Rock Island, to teach ex-offenders how to apply for jobs and get at other resources to live independently.

The vendors represented a mix of social and private agencies. There were no employers there.

The Illinois Secretary of State's office was on hand to give ex-offenders state ID cards, paid for by Rock Island County Court Services.

Derrick Rogers, a 34-year-old ex-offender from Chicago who now lives in Rock Island, said he's trying to find a job to support his family.

"I want to be a better person for my kids," Rogers said. "I'm tired of being the same. I'm trying to find myself."

Rogers said he wants to learn how to be a chef.

"This is helping you move forward in life," said Tracey Adair, a Rock Island County probation officer who, as a volunteer at Wednesday's event, spent about 30 minutes ushering Rogers to each vendor.

Rogers was the fifth ex-offender Adair helped during the day. Organizers say they expected 400 ex-offenders at Wednesday's event, and there was about one volunteer for every two or three ex-offenders. Volunteers included church groups, students and others from the community.

Visitors filled the church's two parking lots and parked in the grass and on several side streets. According to King and several others, the turnout was "phenomenal."

"The goal is to show that the community cares," Mary Engholm, executive director of the Rock Island County Council on Addictions, said. "Many coming out of jail or prison don't know how to access resources. Our goal is to help."

One of the vendors that helps find jobs for ex-offenders is Safer Foundation.

"One of the biggest barriers is the criminal record," said Sue Davison of the Safer Foundation. "We assist those individuals get their foot in the door."

Safer Foundation advocates make contact with Quad-City area employers, establish relationships with those willing to take on ex-offenders and refer individuals, Davison said.

Out of about 350 ex-offenders Safer Foundation assists a year, 150 to 200 land jobs and about 70 percent of them are still on the job after 30 days, she said.

"Our long-term goal is long-term retention," Davison said. "It leads to a reduction in recidivism. We consider it a leg up instead of not being able to get in the door."